

JUNE 21, 1984

A financial journal had a story last week about the Guinness World Records on Giant Fruits and Vegetables. Leave it to the big city press to go blabbing it around that champion squash were weighing into the fives when our calves were taking sets of twins to reach that size. It was just like those urban slickers to point out that the biggest turnip in the world weighed 73 pounds at a time we were hoping to push our lambs past the 55-pound mark.

Noticeably absent from the stories of 255-pound watermelons and 82 -inch gourds was even honorable mention of anything grown in Texas or the Shortgrass Country. South Australia, so the story claimed, produced a radish once that weighed 25 pounds. Way back, County Durham in England had entered a head of red cabbage that weighed 123 pounds. The reporter went on to say that some guy in Nova Scotia had raised a 493.5-pound pumpkin that has been quite comfortable for his wife to step into. But I didn't find a line about our part of the county or our farmers winning any prizes. I guess gigantic whirlwinds or huge boll weevils weren't entered in the record books.

One thing I've learned about stories like the ones on outsize vegetables is that out here in the Shortgrass Country you better watch these cowboys that know about 14-pound drumsticks and Rhode Island red hens that have a wing spread of seven feet. Such information had better be checked further than the front table of the coffee house, or honest reporters like I try to be will find themselves in a hot spot with their editors that'll make the ironing board cover down at the local laundry feel like a cake of ice floating in the Bering Sea.

Don't misunderstand, I am not arguing about the truth over fiction. At this point in life I can't review my work and tell the facts from my imagination. The truth definitely has a place in journalism. Big time scribes, I've heard, fall back on the truth in times of word vacuums or death of their imaginations.

I think if it makes a story better to use facts, then it's permissible. Used as a literary tool in the right proportions and at the right time, I don't think a writer should be faulted for letting himself drift over into the truth.

My problem in the beginning was too much exposure to bunkhouses and the front porches of ranch homes. I got started off confusing veracity with creative story telling. Like I said, now I can't remember what I made up and what actually happened, except there seems to be fewer witnesses to some of my tales than there are to others.

Were you around, for example, when I wrote about the huge South American snake that swallowed a Longhorn cow head first, a cow that had a horn spread 28 inches wide? With your permission, I'd like to make two changes in that story. I'd like to drop 10 inches off that cow's horn spread and lower the size of that boa constrictor's rib cage down a bit.

You see, as I learned after writing the story, in Brazil a Longhorn cow's horns droop downwards like those of their Andalusia ancestors. Furthermore, I was mixed up about the way a snake's stomach cavity is measured down there. They use the same standard that we do on shotguns except a 4-gauge snake is about the same diameter of a

size 14 fireplug in London, England, which is the magnum fireplug of all plugs as far as that grand city's firefighters are concerned.

So if you don't mind, I'll work that over. I sure don't want to be remembered as a big story teller. I wish I had been more careful with my facts. I had no idea that age would make me so picky about cow's horns and snake bellies.